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UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 000212

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM SOCI PREL PGOV KIRF VM HUMANR RELFREE

SUBJECT: UPDATE ON MENNONITE HOUSE CHURCH IN HCMC

REF: HCMC 106 and previous

1. (SBU) In the evening of February 27, local HCMC police detained the wife of imprisoned Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang and 18 worshipers. According to our house church contacts, at the end of the Sunday service, police informed the group that they were assembling illegally and made a report of the incident. They apparently asked Mrs. Quang to sign the document. She refused. At that point, the police brought the churchgoers to the local police station. They were released 6 hours later.

2. (SBU) We followed up with Mrs. Quang on March 4. She confirmed our contacts' account. She added that she told the police that the Prime Minister's February 4 Order on Protestantism legalized operation of the house church. According to Mrs. Quang, police rejected that argument, saying that the Ordinance on Religion forbids the operation of unregistered house churches. It was at that point that Mrs. Quang said that she told police that she did not violate the law, refused to sign the police report, and was arrested. Mrs. Quang said that, following the February 27 incident, she expected to be summoned to the local police station for further questioning, but police have yet to contact her.

Mennonite Prisoner Released

3. (SBU) Mrs. Quang also told us Nguyen Van Phuong, one of the five Mennonites imprisoned along with her husband on November 12, 2004, was released from prison on March 3, upon the expiry of his one-year sentence. Mrs. Quang said that when she met Phuong he appeared thinner, but otherwise did not appear to have any physical or mental issues. She said that Phuong returned to his home in the neighboring province of Dong Nai, where he will undergo a thorough medical evaluation.

4. (SBU) Comment: The February 27 incident is another in a series of confrontations between Pastor Quang's church and HCMC authorities stretching back for at least two years. In contrast, we received no reports of police harassment of other house churches in the HCMC area that Sunday. This overall positive trend is consistent with reports from house church leaders in the HCMC area that police pressure on house churches is down significantly nationwide. Our contacts add that they know of no other occasion when police reportedly cited the Ordinance on Religion to stop an unregistered house church from operating. End Comment.

WINNICK